

The Highlights - Hirschhorn at Gladstone Gallery

In his latest installation, *Universal Gym*, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's radical critique is subsumed by a coded simulation lambasting the culture of exercise. Hirschhorn's third solo exhibition for Gladstone, installed at the gallery's new 21st Street space, is a large scale mock-up of an actual gym space, complete with mannequins and modified exercise equipment.

Much of Hirschhorn's work is characterized by a claustrophobic sensibility, spaces overstuffed with rough-hewn sculptures and collages, art objects overwhelmed by junk materials. Visitors to his 2002 installation at Gladstone, *Cavemanman*, had to burrow through tunnels of an elaborately constructed cardboard cave; his 2006 exhibition *Superficial Engagement* saturated the gallery with visceral, oftentimes over-the-top images and displays of human evisceration and gore. In the former, Hirschhorn succeeded in creating an "actual" physical reference to a Tora Bora-like cave dweller impelled by radical and extremist ideology, while allowing the viewer's navigation of the space to trigger a sense of pathos in response to the attendant psychological condition. In the latter, Hirschhorn's abrasive appropriated imagery and mutilated mannequins are so overwhelming that the message-what's shown is not a representation of hell, but the pornography of violence, promulgated to culture responsible for it-is imprinted on the viewer's mind, regardless of the work's success or failure.



Universal Gym is Hirschhorn's (unsuccessful) attempt at being sparser, and subtler. The use

of materials familiar to Hirschhorn's work-quotidian objects like packing tape, cardboard, wood, plastic, chords, mirrors, and coated wire-accompany materials more appropriate to a gym setting: athletic shoes, plastic bottles, protein powder, exercise equipment, weights, polyurethane fans, televisions, DVDs, resin chairs, and towels. The space itself feels like a large scale collage, a mocking representation of a gym and the culture it promotes.

Hirschhorn's work is polemical in form, argumentative in nature (however obliquely). His primary media, packing tape and cardboard, lends to a reading of his work-and by implication, of the gallery context that supports it-as transient. The objects and situations he engineers seem to be a straw man due to collapse in the face of the greater forces of cultural production, history, and the politics he depicts and critiques. Therein lies the power of his materials as abject constructions, flying in the face of an aesthetic of beauty or permanence. In *Universal Gym*, he narrows his focus to meditate on one overarching theme: the tools and materials of fitness as a house of worship of the body. The presence of the human figure (beyond that of the viewers themselves) functions, as it often does in Hirschhorn's work, as a stand-in for an identifiable being, an archetypical representation of humanity. Dummies and anatomical models are bathed in florescent-lit vitrines, with holes where their hearts should be.



Photo courtesy of Adam Helms

The installation's centerpiece is a ten-foot-high black medicine ball at the room's center, ringed with various pieces of Frankensteinian exercise equipment. The machines, from free weights and bench-press platforms to red exercise balls, are all taped to the cardboard floor, and virtually every three-dimensional object is ensconced to some degree within packing tape. Throughout the space, monitors play videos showing waves from an EKG machine, patterns measuring heart rates. Other than the black of the medicine ball and the brown of the packing tape, the color scheme is predominately red, white, and blue. The installation is rounded out by mirrors, blue cardboard walls, backdrops with tropical and forest scenes, the

word "sculpt" scrawled in red tape, and a single collage of flexing, grimacing muscle men. Globes in the place of punching bags, and a world map on one wall, are the only obvious objects lending themselves to Hirschhorn's expected geopolitical commentary.

Ultimately, *Universal Gym* is an effigy of an actual space, with Hirschhorn simulating reality to a degree that he hasn't before, discarding signifiers for the referents themselves—the stuff of a gym. Hirschhorn's work is most powerful when it advances a critique couched within an elaborately constructed set of materials as a system of references, or when it proffers a singular representation of a symbolic target. Here he attempts that second approach on too grand a scale, trying to inhabit a middle ground between these two possible directions. There is enough in the space for the viewer to absorb the references and try to connect the dots, as one would within a large-scale work, but disappointment abounds. It feels like Hirschhorn is almost lazy, relying on his standard materials to replicate a mundane space. This piece feels like a neutered attempt to meet the grand expectations of his installations, and it falls flat by being too grounded in the actuality of what it's trying to represent. It's underwhelming as a point of artistic departure or social critique.